

IN SEARCH FOR NORMATIVITY OF UNCONSCIOUS REASONING

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PUZZLES

CHURCH IS "DEEPLY" PUZZLED by "the idea that we can be ignorant of our own reasons" (2005, 31). I was, at first sight, puzzled by this puzzlement.

There is no question that we, indeed, are ignorant of many of our reasons. In cases of routine behavior, for instance, we are often not, or only dimly, aware of the reasons for doing something. When I use the indicator when taking a turn to the left with my car, I have no conscious reason for doing so. It has become routine behavior, acquired during my lessons in car driving. My non-awareness may even be considered as sign of my excellence as a driver. This non-awareness is most noteworthy in all those cases in which we, again routinely, withdraw from a particular action. Education and training not only teach us how and why to perform certain activities, they also give us reasons to refrain from all sorts of other actions. There are many reasons to do certain things; there seem to be many more reasons for not doing other things. To suppose that

having reasons would by necessity involve conscious awareness of these reasons would make impossible to live.

So, ignorance seems to be very common, not to say trivial. This raises the question whether there is anything nontrivial in the attempt to make sense of ignorance of our reasons. What element or aspect of ignorance is it that may evoke philosophical interest? Jennifer Church seems to have in mind different overlapping concerns. In the first part of her paper, she addresses

- (1) the issue of legitimacy; that is, the specification of conditions under which attributions of unconscious content are legitimate or illegitimate; and
- (2) the issue of normativity; that is, the question how and why unconscious reasons can be normative for me.

The first question can be discussed without reference to a self; the second question cannot. In the second part of the paper there arise new concerns:

- (3) the issue of having reasons that can not be recognized as reasons by oneself, "strange reasons" so to say, with spatial reasoning as a paradigm case; and
- (4) the issue of being moved by one's reasons through the visceral connection between desires and beliefs on the one hand and motor activity (external or internal) on the other hand; this connection is secured by our emotions.

RECAPITULATION

Let me try to recapitulate some of the main issues. Church makes, first, a distinction between having access to one's reasons and recognizing one's reasons as reasons. She proceeds by discussing the no-access problem in terms of a functionalist metaphysics of mental states. Then she suggests that ascribing unconscious content (or reason) to a person, in fact, boils down to the evaluation of the appropriateness of the ascription of a specimen of practical reasoning to the subject. Practical reasoning involves the structured connection and interaction between beliefs and desires. This structure can be studied at the level of animal psychology; however, there are some important differences between humans and animals: humans can withhold assent, they can lie, and they may recognize mistakes, whereas animals cannot. The possibility of being mistaken about one's reasons leads from the issue of legitimacy to the issue of normativity. For a reason to become my reason, the belief-desire network should make sense, I should feel normatively compelled in some way. So the issue of normativity cannot be studied apart from the possibility of recognition. To recognize a reason as one's reason, one has—at some level of understanding—to assent with its content, even if this occurs implicitly.

In the second part the conditions for recognition are investigated in the form of an analysis of unconscious reasons that are strange. Strange reasons are not recognized because they function in some different way compared to normal conscious reasoning. *Strangeness* is defined here in terms of a different way of processing beliefs, and not, or not only, in terms of (un)familiarity of content. The focus is on norms of reasoning that are uncharacteristic for conscious thought. Church, then, proposes spatial reasoning as a possible candidate. In the spatial world logical constants (if/then, either/or, no), temporal relations, absence, and possibility cannot be represented. So the spatial world is poorer on the one hand, because it cannot represent some common logical, modal, and temporal relations; it is, on the other hand, also more concrete, flexible, and

precise. Finally, she attempts to show that this spatial, imaginative world may constitute a "visceral connection" between one's body and the objects of belief and desire—a connection that "secures the transition from belief and desire to action" (2005, 38).

TOWARD A NORMATIVE ACCOUNT OF SPATIALIZED REASONING

My main question is whether Church has succeeded in providing an account of reasons that are processed differently than normal conscious ones and are nevertheless normative, in the sense that they express why this particular reason holds for me. Why is spatial reasoning a specimen of reasoning, instead of some causal mechanism underlying a network of conscious contents (beliefs, desires, and plans)?¹ What kind of "me" or "self" is this normativity referring to?

The very notion of "holding for me" suggests that even at the level of spatial representation there must exist a relation with a "me" for which the spatialized reasoning holds. However, at this level of understanding it is difficult to imagine how such a normative relationship would look. There may of course be spatial representations of the self that relate to the relevant spatial network representing "reason" or "reasoning." If there would be any normativity at this level, it is highly plausible that this normativity would differ considerably from the normativity holding for conscious reasons. Doubts may arise here, because it is so easy to imagine that at this conceptual level there are only spatial patterns without any normative appeal. However, spatialized reasonings have "peculiarities of function" that are "content constituting," according to Church (2005, 38). If this is indeed the case, it seems plausible to suggest that these peculiarities are constitutive for this other type of normativity; for instance, a kind of "logic" (or appeal or "evidentiality"), which is typical for dream states; or, for some protoform of imagination, childlike or not.

At this point, the roads diverge, I guess. Some argue that the normativity of spatialized reasoning can only be guaranteed by presupposing the

existence of a superordinate "self" at the background of one's mental operations. Spatial reasoning should then be conceptualized as being related, in a way to be specified, to the simultaneous functioning of superordinate levels of coherence and self-understanding. In this hierarchical model, the self functions as a global notion, representing the "whole." This self may be seen as a uniting and coordinating dynamic at the background of daily routines. Normativity in the sense of "holding for me" then means that the presupposed normativity of spatialized reasoning is based on the relationship between spatial figures (or condensations) and a simultaneously present "self." My problem is that this formulation is not precise enough; it does not give a clue about the way this global self codetermines the nature of the relationship with the spatial pattern; in short, it does not make explicit what kind of normativity is implied in spatialized reasoning.

Church does, however, not seem to be inclined to follow this path. She chooses another direction by connecting the normativity of spatialized reasoning to the structure of emotional reasoning. Emotions presuppose a "visceral connection," which guarantees the connection with a self, this time a bodily self. This connection explains the urge emotions add to our acts. However, what has urge to do with normativity? How could the visceral connection establish a normativity of reasoning that makes sense for me and not for merely "a" body, even if this body is mine?

The analogy between spatialized and emotional reasoning may be well taken with regard to the analysis of emotions as such.² However, the analogy begs the question of normativity. Either one's theory of emotions and of emotional reasoning does already conceptually imply a more developed notion of the self, which leads to the question whether there is a qualitative difference between normativity for unconscious and for conscious reasoning. Or, one adopts a more reductive theory of emotion that cannot account for such a developed "self." At that level of conceptualization, it may even become questionable whether it is possible at all to refer to nor-

mativity. The answer to that question depends on one's ontology, for instance, whether one is inclined to ascribe normativity to biological functioning. However, even with a normative account of biological function and the biological underpinnings of our imaginations, we are far from an answer to the question why unconscious reasons hold for me, instead of for a body.

In sum, we are left with questions about the nature of the normativity of spatialized reasoning. Accounts referring to a fully developed self presuppose a normativity, and it will be hard to show that it differs substantially enough from the normativity of conscious states. On the other hand, accounts that only refer to the bodily basis of spatial reasoning do not seem to be powerful enough to explain why unconscious reasons can be my reasons in a more than descriptive sense.³

FAILING APPROPRIATION

It is the merit of Jennifer Church's analysis that she has focused the discussion to a highly critical point: the implicit normativity of parts of one's existence that do not feel as being part of one self. I am inclined to agree with Church that even preverbal forms of experience may exert a normative claim, in the sense that they may say something about me and call for appropriation. However, appropriation may fail. And recognition may be delayed or may never occur. So, what to say if this is the case? Is normativity absent in case of failing appropriation or delay of recognition? To admit this would imply a denial of the possibility of having reasons of which reason does not know.⁴ However, this conclusion is not inevitable. What has to be considered is, at least, the dimension of time; the fluidity of the emotional processes when the unconscious dynamic unfolds over time and comes to the surface in the therapeutic relation; and, most importantly, the assumption of normativity in situations in which it seems to be absent.⁵

Church focuses on forms of reasoning that function differently. She refers to Freud's "functional" account of the unconscious to clarify what she means by "differently functioning." At

the same time, she does not give up the idea that the framework of practical reasoning is adequate to analyze these "differently functioning" reasons. Two points should be raised here, namely, whether the reference to Freud's metapsychology does clarify anything and whether the framework of practical reasoning is adequate for the type of reasons we are discussing.⁶

In my view, it is almost impossible to defend a view in which Freud's account of unconscious processing, for instance in the 7th chapter of *The Interpretation of Dreams* and in *The Unconscious*, is interpreted as a exemplifying a subtype of practical reasoning. Such a view stretches the meaning of *reason* too much. Freud's metapsychology provides a kind of hydraulics of unconscious mental functioning. Within such a framework it is in fact impossible to introduce concepts like belief and reasoning. Freud's unconscious is a quasi-mechanical device. It is hard to see how such a device could reason, even if *reason* is taken in a metaphorical sense.⁷ Intriguingly enough, Church seems to be fully aware of this. She refers to the absence of time and logical constants in the unconscious. Beliefs, however, refer to an evidential context; that is, a context in which one can assent or dissent on the basis of evidence. It is hard to see how this could occur at the level of the unconscious.

Instead of focusing on what Church could mean, let me simply formulate some suggestions. The rationality of unconscious processes may, indeed, be uncovered by the analyst, that is, by a reconstruction of the plurality of unconscious symbolic meanings from the perspective of the person's life story and of what is going on in the therapeutic situation. This reconstruction is not laying bare some hidden content; it is not like breaking the seal of a closed pot and watching what it contains. Reconstruction is a bringing to life of crystallized, frozen content. Content can best be conceptualized as the ensemble of internalized self- and object-representations and their interaction. Meaning and normativity emerge in and by the act of uncovering, which is at the same time a discovery and a recovery. Meaning comes to expression in the relational dynamic between the patient and the analyst, which is a

dynamic that transforms the "repetition compulsion" of "frozen" inner self-object relationships into something more lively and real.

So, it is not Freud's hydraulic metapsychology but psychodynamic practice that gives important clues as to what is really occurring. In their "frozen" form, unconscious reasons are reasons with a merely hypothetical existence, that is, as long as they remain unaddressed. These reasons, of course, influence the feelings and behavior of the client. However, their normativity and rationality only become apparent in the therapeutic situation, that is, in a situation in which the client is asked to take a stance toward his or her non-understood inclinations and feelings. It is of utmost important to realize that the therapeutic relation is determined by the assumption that such rationality and normativity exists. The driving force behind psychodynamic psychotherapy is the paradoxical assumption of something that does not seem to exist at the moment of its assumption. This "something" is meaning (in the midst of meaninglessness), rationality (in a context of irrationality), and normativity (in a situation in which brute facts seem the only reality). From a philosophical point of view this assumption can be interpreted as an expectation with respect to the possibility of opening up (or unfolding) of latent modes of functioning. Quasi-physical entities (the sensation of a lump in one's throat, for instance) are opened up in a biological sense (difficulty in speaking and in swallowing), in an emotional sense (the lump is felt as anxiety), in a symbolic sense (the feeling represents both the desire and the prohibition to speak), in a relational sense (the analyst may be seen as a parental figure who forbids the expression of a particular emotional need), and so on.

Unconscious reasons remain incomprehensible as long as they are considered apart from the interpersonal dynamic between the patient and the therapist (or important others). Their motivational force comes to surface and manifests itself in the interaction with the therapist (or important others), first by repetition, then in resistance to interpretation and change, and finally in tolerance and molding of meaning.

IRRATIONAL EMOTION

There is one other aspect of Church's analysis of unknown reasons I want to address, because it challenges the central role of practical reasoning. Church seems to acknowledge that the object of emotional discomfort need not be identical to the object of one's conscious beliefs. One may think here of the case of suspicion, in which a person cannot stop feeling suspicious in a situation without any evidence whatsoever of untrustworthiness of the person who is suspected. In this case a person rationally rejects the possibility of being misguided. He or she may try to explain away the feeling and will possibly also give full consent to the belief that the other person is trustworthy. Nevertheless the feeling of discomfort remains and may be appropriate—not only when, in spite of all the earlier evidence, it finally appears that the other person cannot be trusted; but also at those moments of suspicion, in which there is no evidence that could support or falsify one's thoughts.

The latter case is, of course, the most interesting for our discussion. How could emotions be appropriate or warranted in situations in which the feeling contradicts the prevailing belief or in which there is simply no corresponding belief? Patricia Greenspan puts it this way:

The propositional object of emotional discomfort need not be an object of belief. [...] my emotion may be appropriate, not ... because ... it happens to fit the facts, but rather because it is ... 'controlled by' some relevant features of my perceptual situation. [...] From my current evidential standpoint the emotion would seem to be best explained by my own uneasiness. So it seems that the emotion may be appropriate in a case where its corresponding belief is neither warranted nor held. (Greenspan 1988, 6)

I am inclined to agree with this position. The important point to note here is that the appropriateness of irrational emotions is not accounted for in terms of degree of evidence for some hidden belief, although there may exist such a belief. The notion of "appropriateness" has a more limited scope, by referring to "a practical adaptiveness or a kind of instrumental value, that is not properly brought to bear on assessments of belief warrant" (Greenspan 1988, 7). In fact, this

suggestion does not differ much from what Church seems to have in mind. The difference concerns the role of belief in unconscious reasoning: Church adheres to a conceptualization in terms of practical reasoning, whereas I am inclined to limit the use of *belief* to situations in which assent on the basis of at least some evidence is possible.

Practical adaptiveness means making a person aware of relevant features of the "perceptual situation," signaling cues—referring to threat, competition, envy, or comfort—beyond or outside the focus of one's immediate awareness. When this occurs it may imply that we are warranted in relying on the evaluative component of emotions, even if the object of evaluation is indefinite. In other words, belief is not the key component to emotion in situations in which we are unaware of its reasons.

NOTES

1. This was indeed Freud's position. Mechanisms like condensation and displacement are described as causally effective mechanisms underlying phenomena like conversion and dreaming; however, they display at the same time a particular emotional and personal meaning from an overarching perspective, the perspective of the biographical self with its conflicts and unfulfilled desires. Church, to my impression, does not sufficiently acknowledge that the quasi-mechanical workings of the unconscious, in the end, have a merely instrumental role with respect to the underlying meaning of the repressed conflict. Causal "mechanisms" like condensation, displacement, and the "mechanisms" of defense, serve biological, emotional, and social ends.

2. Her approach fits well with other recent approaches which view consciousness as a form of action and see motor behavior at the basis of mental processes (Hurley 1998).

3. It is easy to see how close the issue of normativity is connected with discussions about the conceptual status of the first-person perspective. Recognition presupposes a rudimentary sense of self. And this sense of self seems to be implied in the recognition of normativity. However, it seems safe, as Church does, to keep the two issues apart. Normativity does not depend on the subjective recognition of norms.

4. Sturdee's distinction between involuntary irrationality, unconscious irrationality, and rationally motivated irrationality may be helpful here. Unconscious irrationality remains nontransparent and withstands rational clarification (Sturdee 1995).

5. This is another way to approach the subject of our earlier discussion, that is, whether the belief-desire structure of practical reasoning does hold for all cases of unconscious reasoning and whether there are, perhaps, more primitive forms of processing which are still rational (and normative) in some way.

6. It should be noticed that there is a transition in Church's account from the legitimate ascription of reasons (of which one knows not) to the legitimate ascription of (practical) reasoning.

7. In my view, Church's reference to animal reasoning should be considered as an example of such a metaphorical use of *reasoning*.

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